

# Cultural Change in the Educational Setting: *The Integration of Young Moslem Women into Chinese Society*

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**Abstract** — Turkic Moslem people and their culture now extend from the Mediterranean to Western China. The goal of this research is to investigate affirmative action programs such as those at the Minorities University of China in the framework of “cultural identity”. By observing the experience of young Uyghur Moslem women students determine those institutional features that overcome obstacles to cultural change. Cultural identity as Uyghur and Moslem has a major impact on the discussion of the Uyghur population of China. Young Uyghur women face a different set of choices than those of women in other minorities or in the rest of China. If they identify with their culture as Uyghur and Moslem, their culture restricts their opportunities as Chinese citizens. As students at Minorities University of China (MUC) in Beijing, the relative freedom of Beijing has a great impact on these students. Education and employment have a critical impact on the lives of young women and offer them opportunities that might be denied, but these also raise challenges for their families. Institutions such as schools of ethnic studies and the college competitive exam (the *gaokao*) provide opportunities as well as obstacles for Uyghur women and serve to link Uyghur women to the dynamic aspects of change in the Moslem world.

**Index Terms** — Uyghurs, Moslem women, affirmative action in China, education

## I. THE SETTING OF THE STUDY: XINJIANG: TURKIC ISLAMIC CHINA

This research will investigate the changing attitudes of young Uyghur women to their culture, and the role educational institutions in China have on shaping the identity and choices. I will also attempt to frame the debate over programs such as those offered by the Minorities University of China (MUC) in terms of the cultural framework developed by Fredrick Barth and cultural anthropology.

The report is part of a study that took place in Beijing and Kashgar (a largely Uyghur city in Western Xinjiang) over a period of many months during 2011 and 2012. It was conducted with the help of several Uyghur research assistants. The three women discussed represent a good illustration of the operation of theoretical social science constructs in the lives of people.

The Uyghurs are a Turkic people of North West China primarily living in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, closely related in language, culture and ethnicity to their Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen neighbors. They are a small group in terms of China’s population of 1.3 billion, numbering 8.3 million. Although the region was formerly obscure, Xinjiang is now an important part of a wealthy and increasingly powerful China.

Attainment:

	Xinjiang	China
1. Population	17,470,000	
2. Natural Population Growth Rate	12.8	9.57
3. Percentage of Minorities	61.4 %	(< 10%)
4. Illiteracy Males 5 y.o. +	4.7 %	4.5 %
5. Illiteracy Females 5y.o. +	5.9 %	11.3 %
Students 6 y.o. +		
6. Primary School	44.8 %	39.7 %
7. Secondary School	38.9 %	43.7 %
8. Higher Education	5.7 %	2.7 %

Adapted from Kormondy (2012). From China Statistical Yearbook, 1999

As we see in Table I Line 3, the region is largely “minority” in character. Chinese population was low at the time of the liberation (1949), but the development of the region has produced a dramatic increase in the size of the ethnic Han

Chinese population. In the 1990's, and today, the Han Chinese population is concentrated in the Eastern portion of the region. In the center of this region is one of the largest deserts in the world, the Taklamakan. The Uyghur population is concentrated in the West.

Over the last few years there has been considerable urban development in the region, but in general most Uyghurs were raised in rural areas. Not many Uyghurs have been outside of Xinjiang province, and one reason is that Uyghur, rather than Chinese, is the first language for the local population.

The Uyghurs of Xinjiang almost universally identify as Moslems. Employing the concept of 'cultural identity' proposed in Fredrik Barth's work (1969), the fact that the Uyghurs identify as part of 'Moslem culture' makes an enormous statement about their role in Chinese society. A recent study of the Uyghurs published by Idiko Beller-Hann (2008) on the period when groups of small communities managed to develop a common identity, 1850-1949, represents a major work on exactly how this occurred in Xinjiang.

## II. ISLAMIC PRACTICES AS A BARRIER TO CULTURAL ASSIMILATION, POPULATION GROWTH, FAMILY STRUCTURE, RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS

In Table I Line 2 We see that the population growth rate in the province is nearly 33% higher than China as a whole. This is because the Uyghurs and other minorities are exempt from the "one child policy" as it operates in the rest of China. Instead of a nuclear family living in small urban apartments, what we have in Xinjiang is a large patriarchal Moslem family living in separate suburban houses, often with some livestock (sheep, goats, chickens) in the housing area.

The cultural differences that separate Moslems from non-Moslems can be found in observations made about cultural distinctiveness, many of which are applicable to Uyghurs. The important theoretical contributions are those of Lila Abu Lughod (2002) and Valentine Moghadam (1993) for Moslem society, and Linda Benson(2004) and Xiaowei Zang (2010) for the Uyghurs.

Many features of Uyghur identity serve to isolate them from the larger Chinese society. Uyghur dress is a point of contention; women's use of headscarves has been an issue for women in China and. There are language differences between Uyghurs and Chinese. In the Xinjiang region there is often residential separation, Uyghur districts and Chinese districts. Despite variation from community to community, and from decade to decade, there is ample documentation of interethnic hostility, for instance in Bovington (2002) and Baranovitch (2007). The hostility can occur on an interpersonal level, but there have been instances of rioting as well. Naturally, on a day-to-day level, there is also cooperation, and there is no point in making the true situation appear worse than it is.

### 1) *Young Uyghur Moslem girls and educational barriers*

The historical circumstances that brought the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region into the New China in 1949 had major consequences for the Uyghur minority. Sources agree that in 1949 the Uyghur population, male and female, was largely illiterate. As Table I lines 4 and 5 demonstrate, the population is now largely literate, both for males and females. Uyghur female literacy in the region may now exceed the national average in the country. In the context of Central Asia, the literacy figures themselves also represent a dramatic achievement, since female educational attainment is one of the critical issues in Moslem society.

Uyghurs and Han Chinese are literate in different languages. Since literacy in Chinese is a function of memorization and character recognition, the ability to read at a university level is too difficult for most Chinese students. For Uyghurs, whose first language is not Chinese, literacy in Chinese is difficult to accomplish. The difficulty of character recognition in Chinese was recognized very early on in the reform period from 1911-1949, but the effort to substitute phonetic pinyin for characters failed.

With the establishment of the New China in 1949, the remoteness of Xinjiang and the uncertainties of the new government necessitated the development of two separate school systems. Uyghur families are free to send their children to Chinese schools, but in these schools the students would have a difficult challenge of receiving instruction in their second language. This met the demands of the local population, but it created another obstacle for Uyghurs, and especially for young women. Since Chinese is a second language and basic instruction is in Uyghur, an immediate challenge faces all students.

Table I, lines 6 and 7 demonstrate how the situation was resolved to the disadvantage of young Uyghur girls. Compared to the national average, fewer children attend high school in Xinjiang. Given the pattern of school attendance in China, it is widely believed that this is the result of Uyghur parental action.

It is believed that this fall off in attendance comes from the fact that Uyghur girls are withdrawn from school. Linda Benson observes (2004, p. 191), 'Available Chinese statistics on education (in Xinjiang) give rise to a number of questions. ... The statistics do not explain why, for example, the percentage of students (Uyghurs) continuing on to middle school remains relatively low. One factor may be the early withdrawal of girls from elementary school.' Government figures from the 1990's have shown that young Uyghur girls often end their education with primary school.

Also, from Linda Benson (2004, p. 199): 'The government's undeniable successes [in raising the education level of minorities] are tempered by ongoing problems, some of which trace directly to the continued existence of two separate school systems – one for the minorities taught in their own languages and one offering instruction only in Chinese.

... Uyghurs and other Muslim peoples link their concern to preserve their culture and identity with the language of instruction in the schools.' Uyghur schools may not effectively prepare children for assimilation into Chinese culture, but without these schools Uyghur culture itself may disappear. Chinese is taught in all Uyghur language schools.

To control, perhaps to protect, their daughters, Moslem families encouraged them to curtail their education and to marry partners chosen by their parents. Uyghur culture, which is Central Asian culture, has a long history of arranged marriage that continues up until the present time. Current research shows that young Uyghur men are given more freedom to choose their brides while Uyghur girls are offered little choice (Zhang, 2010). Comments made by participants in this study illustrate that controlling parents present obstacles to their children, such as the reluctance to allow their daughters to go to college outside their regional area.

### III. PRESENTING THREE YOUNG WOMEN

#### 1) Aynur

##### a) Aynur -Uyghur Identity and Career

The young women who were interviewed are from large rural or suburban families. Aynur is a 22-year-old woman from a non-urban section of Kashgar. Kashgar is a large urban-suburban area with a population of 350,000 residents, over 90% Uyghur by the 2007 census. The community in which she was raised is rural, with mostly small homes lacking indoor plumbing. Her family's neighbors are farmers. Until a few decades ago there was hardly any motorized travel or rail traffic to the city. Now Kashgar is a major city in the region, with trade ties to Pakistan and Kazakhstan, and an airport.

As a young child, Aynur lived with her grandparents, her mother having left home for work after a divorce from her father. Her grandfather had a minor government position. Her grandparents lived in a society in which people were barely literate, and her grandfather could hardly read a document before he got his job. Her grandparents were no better educated than other residents, although most of the neighbors were farmers and her grandfather was a civil servant. Aynur's grandmother had been a teacher. The couple had six children. 'One of my uncles liked reading; he lived in town and every Friday he came back and brought some books and told me about these books and read to me.' Aynur's uncle was a factory worker. When she was old enough, Aynur went to primary school and read by herself. Her aunt taught her how to dance and sing. Aynur 'was a smart girl so they had no complaints about my studies in school'.

##### b) Aynur: Education and career

Aynur went to Uyghur schools; at the time, there were no Chinese schools in her area. In 1949, at the time of the revolution, Xinjiang was a region in which most local residents did not speak Chinese, so there were no textbooks for the local population other than those in the Uyghur language. The Uyghurs attended Uyghur language schools, and Aynur's

education was in these Uyghur schools. In the Uyghur school system, Aynur was considered very smart in the class and so the teachers favored her. 'They expressed their love without any hesitation. Two teachers in high school showed me the good way to study and plan my life, and I believed them. I would not have (been able to) come to Beijing to study without their help. I believe that education can change a person. Good teachers can help students, and I want to help some students who need help.'

##### c) Aynur: The challenge of the gaokao, – the high school graduation exam

If there is one institution that is the source of wide debate in modern China, it is the *gaokao*. This exam is not required for students who simply want a high school diploma, but each year the teen-age children who are planning to attend college in China take this national competitive exam. It relies heavily on memorized information, and it continues for three days.

The challenge of the *gaokao* is especially difficult in Xinjiang. Uyghur language primary and secondary education is widespread in the province, but if parents choose to send their children to these schools then the children take the *gaokao* in Chinese as a Second Language, which requires a much lower knowledge of Chinese than a regular Chinese high school graduate. Those who take this exam have a limited choice of majors in college. If the students take a regular Chinese *gaokao* they are taking the exam in their second language and competing against Chinese students who are taking the exam in their first language. Despite this, Uyghur parents and Uyghurs in general believe if they do not send their children to Uyghur language schools, then Uyghur language and culture will be lost forever.

Aynur's *gaokao* was in Chinese as a Second Language, which meant that her college choices and her choices of major were limited. 'I give thanks for *gaokao*; although I hated it. The *gaokao* changed my life. When I was a high school student I never thought about my future and college. I was scared of taking the *gaokao*. If you can't do well, you need to wait for one year and take it again. Without passing it, you have no chance to further your education.' The Chinese as a Second Language *gaokao* is comprised of four parts: Chinese, Uyghur literature and language, mathematics, and a fourth comprehensive exam including history, politics, geography, physics, chemistry, and biology.

Aynur's score was one of the highest in her school so she had more choices of universities than her classmates. She chose the Minorities University of China (MUC), where she could get a full scholarship if she majored in Uyghur Language and Literature. Only two people in her school came to Beijing to go to college.

##### d) Aynur: Career

Aynur states that: "Maybe for some people, nation is not important as career. But for me and my (Uyghur) friends, we must think about this. In Beijing, we have good opportunity but for girls it is hard to find a Uyghur boy and raise a family.

As a Uyghur girl, the family is very important for us. If I go back to Kashgar, perhaps I cannot advance in my career because my family has no connections. Kashgar does not have a large job market like Beijing, so I may not have any chance to prove my abilities for my career." What she means by this is that in Xinjiang it is difficult to find a good job if your family cannot help. This 'help' represents family connections and influence and in China is spoken of as *guanxi*. In her view, Aynur's larger job market in Beijing lessens the need for *guanxi*.

Beijing had been a dream to her, and this was something that her parents could not refuse. The choices between career and Xinjiang and choosing a major were very problematic for this young woman. Although her parents had been teachers, she is not fond of teaching. She feels that the curriculum in schools is too rigid and the job is too difficult. Aynur does not feel comfortable engaging in this work.

Instead, what she wants to do is to open up her own educational institution, perhaps a library, and a place where she might have the freedom to educate young Uyghur children with her own curriculum. These are the plans of a young twenty two year old Uyghur woman. They may be difficult to realize, but they represent the attempt of a young woman to balance the strains of parents, opportunities, and the desire for personal independence.

## 2) Meryam

### a) Meryam: *The opportunity to investigate cultural heritage*

The most dramatic example of a Uyghur woman exercising the ability to investigate the past is Meryam, a young woman of Kyrgyz-Uyghur descent who wears full Islamic dress. Unlike most others, she wears not simply a headscarf but an entire outfit of modest clothing. Meryam was not raised in an observant household, and her first lengthy exposure to Islam was through her courses in MUC. Her mother, after a divorce, became more observant at this time as well. Like other Uyghur women introduced here she majors in Uyghur language and literature. What she wants to do is to go to school in Egypt to study Islamic education at a world famous institution, Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Founded in 970~972 AD, it is the chief center of Arabic literature and Islamic learning in the world. This may seem an unrealistic goal but, again, I am reporting what these young students say.

According to the students interviewed, it is difficult for young people to investigate their ethnic culture and history in their home city in Xinjiang. Uyghur history and literature is taught in the Uyghur language public schools, but the young women reported that there were more opportunities for investigation in Beijing. Scholars writing on social policy in Xinjiang have agreed with the observations of respondents in the study (Millward and Tursun, 2004).

Additionally Meryam would like to visit Turkey. She has had the opportunity to study Turkish and Turkish culture at

MUC. After her studies, she wants to work in Xinjiang. She believes Urumchi, the capitol and the largest city in the province, is the best place for her to work in Islamic education. She comes from a rural background. Her parents were poor farmers, and her grandparents were farmers as well.

Courses in Uyghur Language and Literature at MUC Beijing and Lanzhou include the Islamic and old Turkish heritage of the Uyghur nation. Some students in the Uyghur language department at MUC choose to study "old Turkish", the Chagatai language, an extinct Turkic language which was once widely spoken throughout Central Asia, including Xinjiang, and remained the shared literary language until the early twentieth century. Specialists from Turkey serve as visiting professors in old Turkish.

## 3) Radiyeh

### a) Radiyeh: *Family control and women's choices*

Radiyeh is a young woman from Kashgar who speaks an excellent English in addition to Uyghur and Chinese. Radiyeh's major is similar to the others, Uyghur Language and Literature, but unlike most of the other students, she wants to live away from Kashgar because her parents are too controlling. She faced great opposition from her parents when she wanted to go to school in Beijing, and it was only the fact that she was scored well enough on the gaokao to attend a school as prestigious as MUC that they allowed her to leave Xinjiang and go to Beijing. In Xinjiang, Radiyeh is one of the first generation of women to deal with such issues. A university opportunity in the capitol of China was beyond the hopes of many Uyghurs from earlier generations. Radiyeh is also escaping from her family background, since her parents, brothers and sisters are all farmers.

As Radiyeh says: '(In the old days,) the child of a farmer would marry a farmer – now a girl (a Uyghur college student) may be more educated than her boyfriend. In the time of her grandmother (the 1950's) the wife usually stayed home.'

Things are changing in Kashgar, but not quickly enough for Radiyeh. She would like to find a job in Beijing, but even if she found a job back in Xinjiang, she would be reluctant to live near her parents. Issues such as leaving home, going out with boys, and finding a job are all problems in religiously conservative Uyghur families. The fact that Radiyeh went to Beijing was a great problem for her parents. Radiyeh said that in this respect, Xinjiang is like Afghanistan, which borders on Xinjiang in the West. This underlines how severe the limitations on Moslem women in Xinjiang can be.

Radiyeh's problem is not so much the job – she expected that she would be a teacher. With a major in Uyghur Language and Literature this is one logical outcome for an educated Uyghur woman. Radiyeh is also interested in becoming a cultural worker, a journalist or one who works for a museum. Radiyeh hopes that she can get a better job in Urumchi, far across the province from Kashgar. Her first priority is personal freedom.

One of the things that weigh heaviest on Radiyeh's mind is the tradition of arranged marriage. Speaking about Central Asian family practices, Dami and Sheikh (2000) write: 'in many senses, marriage is considered the union of two families, and the parents usually arrange the marriage. Although the free consent of both the bride and groom are essential, parental coercion is often strong. Some parents are evidently beginning to understand the marital concerns of their children.' The practice of choosing marriage partners from within the parents' community of friends and business acquaintances, however, continues to be considered important by young and old. Choosing a spouse may involve family members other than the immediate families of the couple. The matter is further complicated by the high costs of elaborate weddings and dowry, which means the couple will have to rely on parental financial support in order to marry. This in turn increases their dependency on parents and increases parental control.

Facing issues such as these means that a young Uyghur woman must confront her parents at an early age about her hopes and plans, when she is in her teenage years, or be bound to her parents' choice for the rest of her life. These traditions are changing, but young, ambitious women must decide their fate when very young.

#### IV. OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO SOCIAL CHANGE

The university itself, the Minorities University of China, and the major, Uyghur Language and Literature, represent affirmative action in China, a country with one of the most vigorous affirmative action programs in the world.

There are essentially three issues raised against such programs:

1. Funding for 'affirmative action' programs such as these is not sufficient to meet needs.
2. The central issue for minorities should be the growing inequality of access to the best education on the part of ethnic minorities.
3. The current system of affirmative action programs creates two standards, which not serve minorities well.

##### 1) *Funding, Evan-Hearne (2009):*

The Minzu University of China (also known as Minzu Daxue in Chinese or simply Minda for short) is a major ethnic minority university in China. Located in Beijing, approximately 70% of the students are non-Han Chinese minorities. The school has been designated as a Project 211 School. This means that the government gives the Minzu Funding: University of China special funding and support for the purpose of modernizing and improving the competitiveness of higher education in China.

In other words, the government has now committed itself to increased funding.

##### 2) *Inequality of access to the best education (Ives, 2010):*

Now there is growing concern that decades-old programs designed to help minority students are not effective. The proportion of ethnic minority students studying at Chinese universities has not kept pace with an expansion of the nation's higher education system, particularly at China's top-tier universities, said Gerard Postiglione, Director of the Wah Ching Center of Research on Education in China at the University of Hong Kong. China's ethnic minority education policy is failing to bridge the growing wealth disparity between coastal areas and its interior border regions, he added. "The Chinese government tends to paint a rosy picture by talking about how literacy is going up, but most people feel that in the market economy, there's been a downturn in benefits for minorities."

##### 3) *Problem of different standards (gaokou scores) (Rui Yang, Mei Wu 2009):*

Sautman reports that Han students admitted to Xinjiang universities in 1986 averaged 435 points in science and 440 points in liberal arts; whereas minorities averaged 300 points in science and 245 points in liberal arts. In 1987, Han students from Xinjiang admitted to national key universities averaged 472 points in science and 445 points in liberal arts; minority students averaged 313 and 269 points respectively.

There's a lot of debate, and not just among scholars, about why China should perpetuate a system where minorities are poor compared to Han Chinese," concurred Dru Gladney, an anthropologist and expert in China's minority policies at California's Pomona College. "Under the old centralized system, the government used to spend a lot of money on the border areas," Gladney added. "But now they're relying on the market economy, and many of these 'nationalities' universities have suffered as a result, because their funding hasn't kept pace."

##### 4) *Minority Studies Departments*

- These young Uyghur women are not from wealthy families. In order to recruit good Uyghur students, MUC offers scholarships to students that major in Uyghur Language and Literature
- A major in Uyghur Language and Literature is a general liberal arts major, including language, culture and sociology in the first language of the student. It is not intended to prepare the students for business or engineering, but rather to allow them take their place as an educated person in their home region, Xinjiang. Most of those who major in this field of study do not have any life experience outside Xinjiang, except for their years in MUC in Beijing
- The criticism that Uyghur students do not have access to top tier schools must confront the fact that for most Uyghurs, Chinese is a second language. University level literacy is an enormous barrier to many working class students from a Chinese language background,

and even Westerners who study in top tier Chinese universities often take courses in English

- Another point to consider is that Uyghurs have an enormous attachment to their province, and plan a future for occupation and family life in terms of Xinjiang. Many have reported that for Chinese Han youth, there is very little attachment to Xinjiang. Students from highly ranked Chinese Universities have little interest for living in a relatively poor rural area far away from the cultural centers of Beijing and Shanghai, and the conflict of Han and Uyghur is one of two working class communities
- MUC students discussed here believe that the university departments play a very positive role integrating them to the university and to modern China. Most of the students comment on the friendships they have made with other Uyghurs at MUC. One freshman at the university reported that her parents were upset that she was leaving home for Beijing, but she found the courses interesting and the atmosphere very positive, and her parents were pleased that she made friends with other Uyghurs. In talking about her major, one student commented about an English class she had taken, and the professor talked the whole time, while in the Uyghur classes the entire class participated and it was a more interesting class
- Students also mentioned the friendliness the Uyghur faculty and staff at the school. Uyghur parties and events feature faculty speakers, and at one graduation party a leading faculty member congratulated all the participants individually. These events draw not only the students, but also the Uyghur community in Beijing, who bring their young children. Department events are posted on Uyghur web sites, and between the Internet and word of mouth, the Uyghur community in Beijing is well represented at Uyghur events at MUC. As was shown in the case of Aynur and Maryam, these same departments heighten Moslem and Uyghur awareness and solidarity. The Internet and the school expose students to developments in the global Islamic community. They are exposed to speakers and to ideas that are not available in Xinjiang
- Aynur commenting on the Uyghur Studies School: 'Our department at MUC very famous in Xinjiang. In Xinjiang University and Xibe Minzu University (in Lanzhou) and in Xinjiang Normal University there are also Uyghur language and literature departments. Our teachers at MUC are good, they have good personalities and they are supportive. There are chances to go abroad; they help us with employment, and provide information. We can learn everything about minority studies if we want. We are in Beijing. Beijing is our New York.'

## V. CONCLUSION

In Central Asia, and especially in a secular society such as China, university study may introduce young students to membership in a larger world Moslem community.

The Minorities University of China provides the chance to participate in the liberalism of Beijing compared to the perceived limitations in Xinjiang province. Experience in the university provides an opportunity for investigation of one's ethnic culture in a way that is not fully explored in Xinjiang. The preferences of women, and the opportunity to escape parental control are facilitated in college. Education and employment opportunities are the vehicles for group integration into larger Chinese society.

Ethnically oriented institutions such as the Uyghur Department of Language and Literature, which might appear to further separate young people from the Chinese society, actually helps to integrate these students into academic life, and at the same time it supports investigation into an exciting realm of ideas. The Moslem awakening, a process that is still in its early stages in this century, is advancing through the preferences of women.

For the three young women involved, what makes this possible is the competitive high school exam. Nothing is as important as this for providing the opportunity for self-advancement. The *gaokao* is actually the only door open to these young women. They come from large families in provincial schools far away from the center of Chinese economic and intellectual life. The parents in all likelihood lack the money and *guanxi* (connections) to offer significant help. The young women are on their own.

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